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RR RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHSA #0983/01 1300855
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R 090855Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4408
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 2210
RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 5574
RUEH DU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 9794
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 PRETORIA 000983

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S, DRL/MLGA, AF/RSA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AU](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: PEER REVIEW MAKING LITTLE PROGRESS

REF: 07 PRETORIA 0606

PRETORIA 00000983 001.2 OF 004

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Ross Herbert met with PolOffs to discuss his new book, "The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM): Lessons from the Pioneers," which examines APRM's pitfalls and yet to be unleashed potential, nearly six years after its formal adoption. The APRM's intent of fostering good governance by encouraging governments to be self-critical, giving civil society a voice in policymaking, and inviting outside criticism has been groundbreaking. However, the program has been plagued by political interference and by lack of capacity, financing, and political will in both participating countries and the APRM Secretariat. Despite the flaws, the APRM has the potential to play a positive role in improving governance in Africa by facilitating a healthy national dialogue between government, civil society, and business on the key challenges facing a country. The fact that APRM is African-created and African-led only enhances its credibility on the continent. The key issue remains whether governments that have signed up but not yet completed the exercise view APRM as a public relations tool or as a genuine process of national dialogue, consultation, and planning. END SUMMARY.

APRM'S UNLEASHED POTENTIAL...

¶2. (SBU) PolOffs met with Ross Herbert, Head of the Governance and APRM Programme at the South African Institute of Foreign Affairs to discuss his new book, "The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM): Lessons from the Pioneers," which examines APRM's pitfalls and yet to be unleashed potential nearly six years after its formal adoption. (NOTE: Thus far, 29 countries have formally joined the APRM -- more than half of the AU's 53 member states -- but only six have completed the exercise: Mauritius, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Algeria, and South Africa. The "pioneers" are the first five countries to have completed the process: Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritius, and South Africa. END NOTE) Herbert believes the program overall is "a positive force" for four reasons. First, it is unprecedented for incumbent governments to throw themselves open to outside scrutiny. Second, it should condition heads of state to hesitate before acting if they know they will not be able to get away with poor governance. Third, it allows civil society and foreign experts to write definitive critiques of national governments' performances and for civil society and business leaders (at least in theory) to contribute to the policy making process. Last, it has the

potential to rebuild trust in politics and inject fresh thinking into national problem solving. Thus far, Herbert said country review team reports by outside experts have been constructive, and clearly not intended to embarrass any government.

¶3. (SBU) Herbert feels the APRM will eventually be successful if the African Union (AU) can credit even one or two improvements in governance in each participating country. Ghana, one of APRM's pioneers, is a good example, he said, pointing out that Ghana did not become defensive about civil society's criticisms, and actually made concrete changes based on the APRM report like reducing the size of its cabinet.

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BEING HELD BACK BY LACK OF CLARITY AND CAPACITY
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¶4. (SBU) In official documents, the APRM process sounds deceptively straightforward: establish and organize relevant institutions, make a plan for research, write a self-assessment report, and define remedial actions for governance gaps in a Program of Action. However, Herbert said the process is far more complex and time consuming than governments first imagine. Herbert contrasted the APRM process with OECD peer reviews, which focus narrowly on one subject. The APRM, on the other hand, examines almost every state activity under four broad themes: democracy and political governance, economic governance and management, corporate governance, and socio-economic development.

¶5. (SBU) Moreover, Herbert said APRM rules are unclear and little attention has been paid to training or advising

PRETORIA 00000983 002.2 OF 004

participating countries on the process. The APRM's Self-Assessment Questionnaire, which guides the reviews, has 25 objectives, 58 questions, and 183 indicators. Herbert said many of these questions require in-depth research that has never been done and queries that are not easy to answer. For smaller countries, like Lesotho, the burden is even greater, he said, because the workload is the same, but civil society organizations and governments have even less manpower and funding. In fact, as ground-breaking as the involvement of civil society is in policy making, most civil society organizations on the continent lack the ability to engage in policymaking, according to Herbert. Even hiring academic or think-tank institutions to carry out some of the research has been problematic in several countries due to government delays. For example, Herbert's employer, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), was asked to contribute to South Africa's peer review process, but was given a one-year contract which was signed more than 11 months after the starting date and delivered after the contract's expiration.

¶6. (SBU) As a result, he says the process, which was originally envisioned as taking six to nine months, took the pioneers on average 36 months, with most countries "flailing for at least a year or two, then hastily undertaking most of the work at the tail end of the process." Herbert complained that these self-imposed tight deadlines only drive the process toward "superficiality." In the end, APRM reports are relegated to "some mid-level bureaucrat whose only interest is in finishing a report," Herbert said. (NOTE: Because the APRM process is entirely voluntary, the APRM Secretariat cannot impose deadlines. However, after a certain amount of time has elapsed with no progress, the APRM Secretariat can diplomatically pressure countries to move along. END NOTE) Herbert believes that pressure is growing to accelerate the pace. However, Herbert pointed out the paradox that the credibility of the entire process is likely to suffer if the pace does not pick up, but getting the job done quickly will also prevent the process from being rigorous and broadly consultative.

COMMITMENT QUESTIONED AS WELL

17. (SBU) With only six countries completing the process in six years, Ross believes APRM suffers from a lack of commitment from both participating countries and the AU. Some governments, he believes, like Cameroon and Ethiopia, have signed up "disingenuously" as a form of public posturing, while others "only want the PR value of a consultative mechanism." Many governments also fear that civil society will be overly negative. For some countries, like Namibia and Botswana especially, there is no advantage to participating. "They already think they have a good reputation for good governance and participating in something like this could potentially tarnish it," he argued.

18. (SBU) Even AU commitment appears to be lacking at times, Herbert said. APRM issues are always discussed at the end of AU summits or postponed, he said. Some APRM review teams have gone out unprepared, as was the case in Algeria, when the APRM review team had to come back another time because they had not read the country's self-assessment report before they had not read the country's self-assessment report before deploying, which was incomplete.

19. (SBU) The APRM Secretariat also seems to be suffering from poor governance, according to Herbert. The current Panel of Eminent Persons is a mixed bag, according to Herbert, but will undergo a complete turnover by the end of the year. "The problem with all bureaucracies is that eventually a culture of self-preservation kicks in," he argued. The APRM Secretariat has become a "grave train" for some, with some members "only on the look-out for their next per-diem," Herbert said.

PROCESS SUBJECT TO POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

10. (SBU) Herbert argued that the APRM process cannot be done in a political vacuum because it touches on issues like democratic and political systems, corruption, service

PRETORIA 00000983 003.2 OF 004

delivery, respect for human rights and systemic gaps that contribute to poor governance. For the defensive-minded, like Rwanda and South Africa, the very existence of such discussions will lead to efforts to suppress information and stifle debate, according to Herbert. In fact, Herbert said that Rwanda was open to suggestion on economic management issues, but not on political intimidation. Also, Kenya's self-assessment was strong, but line ministers refused to implement any suggestions, taking criticism personally. This resulted in a program of action that was extremely vague, citing things like "improve justice system." Incumbent governments also worry about what a negative report might have on donor aid, investment flows, and their success in future elections.

11. (SBU) Herbert was especially critical of South Africa's APRM process, saying "South Africa was especially prideful, with an attitude like, we don't need this." The SAG, like the Rwandan government, insisted on significant control over the process, arguing they needed it if they were to take ownership, but then proceeded to drown out the voice of civil society, according to Herbert. He said the SAG invited 15 NGOs to participate in the process; the NGOs met once and then never again. He also said that some think-tanks, including SAIIA, had some productive discussions with mid-level officials working on APRM, but that their suggestions were edited out of the final report. "The South African government refused to admit any fault they aren't already working on," he complained. Herbert also questioned the timing of the SAG's research on government performance,

saying the administration of the questionnaire immediately before municipal elections was a "quasi-campaign activity" designed to make voters believe the ANC was canvassing voters to find out what they really cared about. Herbert knows the questionnaires were never examined; SAIIA pestered the SAG for months to see the questionnaires and finally found sealed boxes from two provinces (Free State and Northern Cape) in an abandoned office.

APRM LACKS BITE

¶12. (SBU) Ultimately, APRM suffers from what Herbert described as "lack of bite," meaning the APRM process fails to link findings with results or consequences. In most cases, program of actions simply list ongoing reform efforts, such as "anti-corruption unit established on this date," without ever explaining how APRM findings would be addressed within existing efforts, which have obviously not worked yet. Herbert described many programs of action as "crap, with descriptors like fight corruption, but no modalities." "Of course, the consequence of vagueness means that everyone can claim success!" Herbert argued.

ROLE OF DONORS

¶13. (SBU) Herbert admits that the APRM process has not been a floodgate for donor funding as some expected. Many investors and development partners who were eagerly awaiting APRM reports have begun looking elsewhere for government assessments. However, Herbert still believes that the APRM process could be a critical entry point for the World Bank, IMF, or other donor/lending agencies since the APRM process identifies priorities and the programs of action should establish a track record which donors can cite. However, Qestablish a track record which donors can cite. However, Herbert reminded Poloffs that many African countries are hesitant to be "bear-hugged" by donors right now, giving the example of the AU turning down the EU's offer of USD 2 million because "it did not want to be accountable."

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) As we noted in reftel, the African Peer Review Mechanism remains the most significant and innovative development of the NEPAD initiative to date. While admittedly flawed, APRM still has the potential to play a positive role in improving governance in Africa through facilitating a healthy national dialogue between government,

PRETORIA 00000983 004.2 OF 004

civil society, and business on the key challenges facing a country. The fact that APRM is African-created and African-led enhances its credibility, allowing criticisms to be aired that might be dismissed as "neo-colonial" if they originated from North America, Europe, or the IFIs. The key issue appears to be whether governments view APRM as a "check the box" exercise or a genuine process of national dialogue, consultation, and planning. While it is too soon to judge whether the peer review process will have any long-term impact on improved governance in Africa, we believe APRM is an important emerging institution worth following and supporting.
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